

Oral History Interview with

BILL STANGL

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At Skyland Conference Hall
66th Reunion of the Shenandoah Chapter
of the
Civilian Conservation Corps

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Transcription

JA: Skyland at the Conference Hall, and we're here for the Annual CCC Reunion. I'm talking with Bill Stangl and we're doing this interview today. Stangl, and we're interviewing here, he's with the CCC, and uh, Bill tell me about when you first heard about the Civilian Conservation Corps.

BS: Well it was back when I was 15 years old I think. I think it started in '33. And it lasted 'til '44, but uh, in 1937 I became eligible to enter a CCC camp. And the reason I did, because I was a high school dropout, and those days was Depression days. It was tough to get a job. So I decided to, well take a chance and join the CC camp. President Roosevelt at that time endorsed it.

JA: Where were you living then?

BS: I was living in Allentown, Pennsylvania. So I enlisted, I passed, and we were shipped on by train from Allentown, right down here to uh, Elkton, Virginia. And there a CC camp truck picked us up and took up to the first camp, which was at that time Camp NP-3 on the Skyline Drive. That was the first camp on the Drive, coming from the south side, from Elkton.

JA: And you stayed there the full time, working out of Camp NP-3, is that correct?

BS: Yes, yes. NP-3, our job was uh, cutting down dead trees to take them out of the forest, to make the forest look more beautiful. But we had to cut them to, they would touch the ground. In other words we couldn't lay them across. You know what I mean, you had to cut them up so they hit the ground and would rot. And also we got to build a African American park.

JA: Campground?

BS: Campground at Lewis Mountain. Yeah, that was the one that we were working on.

JA: Yeah, what did you do there, at Lewis Mountain?

BS: Well, we cut the trees down, built up the roads there to drive around.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: As a matter of fact, we just passed uh, this morning we passed through there, just to reminisce.

JA: Did you build any of the uh, the comfort stations?

BS: No, we didn't do any building. All we did was the.

JA: Clearing?

BS: The clearing and the uh, and then at that time you were allowed to burn all the dead wood you know. Uh, so when that was done, we went into building some of these, or repairing some of these stone guardrails along the road. Uh, cutting trees down, and then there's a few times I think that, twice we had forest fires. We helped to fight the fire, the fires in the Valley. Uh, camp was good. We had a good time back there. We, we used play football and baseball with the camp next, below us. That was Camp 10. That was Broad, Big Meadows.

JA: Were you on a team then?

BS: We were on a team, yes. We played football.

JA: Yeah.

BS: Uh, we got beat most of the time, because there were bigger guys up there.

JA: Bigger guys there.

BS: But we enjoyed it you know.

JA: Yeah. What was camp life like? Did you get up early in the mornings?

BS: Oh yes, we were up in the morning, and stand in line, and had to answer uh. You know, uh, that'll be doing the same day again. Uh, we met a few, a few buddies from the hillbilly country area.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: It was good. And they used to go to town you know. There with the truck twice a week.

JA: Twice a week you went to town?

BS: Twice a week, we went to.

JA: Where did you go when you went to town?

BS: Elkton. And into uh, Luray we were one time.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: We went to Staunton at one time. And also to Harrisonburg we went quite a few times.

JA: Really?

BS: Yeah.

JA: And uh, did they, was there some place there that you went directly to go to, a place uh, to meet other people, to uh?

BS: Well we walked the sidewalk looking for girls. But, couldn't find any. We went to uh, I think that, I think they had a movie theater in Harrisonburg at that time. But most of the time was just walking around with the boys.

JA: Mm hmm. And the trucks would pick you up a couple hours later, and bring you back up again.

BS: Yes, right. At that time, with our \$8 dollars a month we'd buy a few thing you know. We got into smoking, of course I don't do it anymore. But at that time you bought a pack of Bull Durham. I don't know if you know what that was?

JA: Yes.

BS: It was like sawdust. And we'd roll our own you know. It'd last us a week. They were 5 cents a pack.

JA: Right. Uh, when you, when you uh, the townspeople, were they nice to you?

BS: Oh yes.

JA: Did they have any events to, with the army USO and so forth?

BS: Yes they were very nice to us. The local people were nice people. Always, there was no problem. And I just said, we walked around and stopped at different stores, and talked a little bit, but that's all.

JA: Yeah. How long were you in the CCC?

BS: I was in 2 terms.

JA: 2 terms?

BS: Yeah, mm hmm.

JA: And when you first came there, was it in the winter time, October, or?

BS: I left in September, came down in September, and we stayed through the winter, and then the next term was through the summer. Yeah, we.

JA: Mm hmm. It was cold, cold weather coming up when you first got there?

BS: Yeah, the first term was cold, very cold. Uh, and then of course, we couldn't do much work, except maybe clean up snow you know. Clean up the gutter, the uh.

JA: Culverts maybe?

BS: Culverts, and the, clean the leaves out that fell through in the fall you know. Other than that, we had good times.

JA: Right, yeah.

BS: We used to go on up, take our 8 bucks a month and go down to the. We also belonged to a choir, singing choir.

JA: Oh, interesting.

BS: The chaplain there was uh, taught us how to sing uh. Just the ones that wanted to sing, there's about maybe 20 boys of us.

JA: Right.

BS: And I was one of them. I like singing you know, so.

JA: Did you have a concert someplace for people?

BS: No, just ourselves.

JA: Just enjoyed singing?

BS: Yeah, right, right.

JA: Did you have a radio there in camp? Uh, did you know what was going on in the outside world? Or did uh, how about newspapers?

BS: No newspapers. I don't remember. I, no radios.

JA: No radios.

BS: No. We used to take walks down along the Appalachian Trail. And there was a few boys from, from around like I said, close by. They used to live down there. I got friendly with one of them, we took a walk down to his house. This was really country, you know, country living.

Carrie Janey: Do you remember his name?

BS: Uh, Roach I believe his name was.

CJ: Roach?

BS: Uh, Roach, yeah, I forgot his first name.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: But, they're friendly, very friendly.

JA: Yeah, so you got to know some of the people around?

BS: Yes, the local people, local boys. That uh, I don't know how they got in, but they were close by, 'cause they, uh. We used to take walks up to like I said, the trails north along, along Skyline Drive up to our first outlook, or overlook. I forget the name of it now. We drove up that when we came here yesterday, but I couldn't find our campsite.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: And I think somebody said it was uh, uh, I remember some kind of.

CJ: Piney River.

BS: No, the one before that. It's the first camp coming from Elkton, making a left turn, the first camp on the right hand side.

CJ: South River?

BS: Could be, could be.

CJ: There's a picnic ground there, called South River.

BS: Is there? But you know, it's all grew shut now, that's why I couldn't find it. It's all trees. It was all open, bare, bare fields.

JA: And how long has it been since you, you've been back to the park?

BS: I think it might have been maybe 12, 14 years ago, so I drove by it. At that time I found it very easily.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: Walked through the area. And in 15 or 20 years it really grew shut, I couldn't find it this time. We were on our way to Georgia. That's how we, drove through this way.

JA: When you were uh, at the Camp, did they have a lot of educational things for you to do? Did you get involved in uh, learning uh?

BS: Uh, the only thing is, I belonged to that singing group you know, nothing else other than, we had our turns at the kitchen. We had you know, KP duties.

JA: You had KP duties?

BS: Oh yes, we had KP duty.

JA: And uh, you had to serve, and uh clean up afterwards?

BS: Peel potatoes before, before supper.

JA: Just like the army, huh?.

BS: Right. And you know, we were so poor when we left home. We were on relief, our parents were on relief. I didn't know what a grapefruit looked like until I came to the CC camp. In the morning your fruit's there, you know. Your grape, and pancakes. I never saw pancakes before. They were good!

JA: Yeah.

BS: And the grapefruit, you know. I didn't know how to eat a grapefruit. I saw an orange but I never saw a grapefruit. Uh. And uh, breakfast, I never ate breakfast. All I had in my life before I came to the CC was a cup of coffee and a piece of bread. My mom used to bake her own bread you know, and a cup of coffee, that's all. But I came into the CC, golly! This thing was, you know, the quantity of tables lined up with different kinds of foods.

JA: Yeah.

BS: So we chowed down pretty good here.

JA: Yeah. What about the other meals, did you have a lot of good?

BS: Oh yeah. Good. They were all good meals.

JA: Yeah.

BS: Uh, they were a lot of pork chops, and uh, course we, I'm from German descent, and we're used to sour krout. And uh, 'cause the noodles in sour krout, they got that you know. But, no this, this was something. I never, never experienced that before.

JA: Right.

BS: Oh I enjoyed the camps, yes.

JA: And uh, what about the uh, all the boys in the camp, did they get along pretty well?

BS: There was, I don't remember any, we did have, occasionally we had boxing practices you know, that's all. But never no fights. I don't remember anybody ever getting really angry at anybody else, you know. Never had fights.

JA: What about the uh, people in charge of the camp, the military people? Did they uh?

BA: Very good. They were army people, yeah.

JA: Right. And they kept things going pretty well?

BS: Oh yes, they did. There was everything up to, right up to snug you know. You'd go out in the morning, you had to stand in line, just like in the army. Know, you had to, I enjoyed it very much. Uh, well what else can I tell you? I, uh.

JA: Did uh, did you, were, were the people healthy there? Did anybody ever get sick, uh? Did you have a doctor close by?

BS: Oh we had doctors. Uh, you had to stand in line, I think it was once a week, in the barracks. You know, out in front of your, or in front of your bunk, and undress in front of him. Your, drop your pants and everything beyond that. Some things I don't even like to discuss now. But uh, they uh inspected us and all. Like once a month they did.

JA: Did, did any of the fellows get, get injured uh, during the time you were working there?

BS: I don't recall. I don't, I don't remember, no.

JA: And on Sundays, did they have church service for everybody? Did they uh?

BS: Well I don't remember that either. I can't remember that, that we went to church. We might have went down, downtown into either Harrisonburg or Elkton. I think we did. Matter of fact, I think it was, especially during the holidays. Like Christmas you know.

JA: Right.

BS: And New Years. Other than that I don't recall. Hey you're talking like 60, like 65 years ago.

JA: Just like, just yesterday, right?

BS: Right. No, not so far. But, no, we enjoyed it. I, I just can't understand why we don't have it now. With our young kids should be, you know, be taken up with this.

JA: Yeah. Uh, when you were working did you do any planting along the Drive? Did you do? Uh?

BS: I wasn't in with that type of group. I uh, mine was always uh, with cutting trees. And in the winter time we couldn't cut trees, we had to uh, clean out the culverts. And uh, course if it was too heavy, snow was too heavy, then you didn't do nothing. You just stayed in the barracks all, all day.

JA: When you couldn't, when there's a real cold weather and so forth and you couldn't work, did they uh, and you had to spend a day inside waiting around, did you have to put extra days in for the?

BS: To make up for that?

JA: To make up for that.

BS: No, not that I remember, no.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: No, we always had our days off that we had.

JA: And did they give you good, good clothing to wear? And uh.

BS: Oh yes. Oh yes. I had my clothing for years after that. Years. Uh, I, when I got out of the CC camp there's still no work to be done, so like I said before, I went on the bum. And I had my jacket along, that I had from the CC camp you know, I took that along. I went out to California on a freight train. And it was one colored fellow, one African American, wanted to steal it off of me. I says no, I says. He says, Where you're going it's going to be warm. I said, No, I'm going back up the Pennsylvania, it's cold up there. So, uh, I, I, he didn't get it. I had it for a long time after that. Just don't know, I might still, I still have my locker that I had.

JA: Do you?

BS: And, suit, trunk you know. I think you had to buy them for \$5 dollars. One was 5, and one was like 8 or 10 dollars. I got the cheaper one.

JA: You had to buy it?

BS: I still have it.

JA: You do, that's good.

BS: I take it up, as a matter of fact I have it in my hunting camp, up in, up in Potter County, Pennsylvania. Up near Erie. You know where Erie is?

JA: Mm hmm. Yes.

BS: That's where, we have a hunting camp up there. And that, uh, I'll, relish that as long as I live. I have it under, under my bunk and every time I go up there, my hunting clothing is in there.

JA: Yeah.

BS: Yes. I uh, it always reminds me. And it has my name on there. CC camp, the numbers and all you know. Oh yeah.

JA: Right, right.

BS: As long as I live I'll have that there.

CJ: Were most of the guys in your camp from Pennsylvania?

BS: Well, no.

CJ: No?

BS: Our group that, that camp down there from, the were from Pennsylvania, like Tamauqua, and uh, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, them places there. But no, there, there's some people from New York or from Philadelphia. But those kids didn't stay long. They went W, what is that?

CJ: AWOL?

BS: A-W-O-L.

JA: Really?

BS: Yeah. They, they took off. They, Philadelphia kids, they're not the working type, you know. So they took off. A-W-O-L.

JA: Did they ever try to bring them back that you heard of?

BS: They tried looking for them, but they never found them. I think, they didn't take too much time to look for them, after they got out, you know. They thought maybe they got lost in the woods. Drove up and down the road for a few miles, up and down, but, but they didn't pay too much attention to that.

CJ: You said you knew some of the people who lived here in the mountains, at the time. You mentioned the Roach man.

BS: Roach, yeah.

CJ: Were there still stores on the road down to Elkton, on the road that crosses the mountain on Swift Run? Were there still stores there at that point?

BS: Do you mean like little general stores?

CJ: Uh huh.

BS: Not that I recall.

CJ: No?

BS: Nothing, no. When you got close to Elkton there might have been, yes. Uh, no I don't remember any stores.

CJ: Do you remember any sawmills or anything like that?

BS: Oh golly, no, I don't remember that either. There might have been a sawmill, I remember when we went through here like I say 18, 20 years ago.

CJ: Oh really?

BS: But uh, I made a, I made a few trips down through this way, like I say a couple years, 12, 15 years ago I found the campsite. But yesterday I came up this way I couldn't find it. I was so disappointed.

CJ: So grown up?

BS: We went by stores, uh, Lewis Mountain, turned around. I knew that was too far already. I turned around because that's where we, built the park for the African Americans. We turned around, all the way back down to er, 33, where 33 crosses over. Turned around, went back there to find it, I just couldn't find it.

CJ: Right. I read somewhere that at South River at the picnic ground, that the CCC guys landscaped that area, and they designed the campground, not the campground, the picnic ground area.

BS: Might have planted trees there?

CJ: Mm hmm.

BS: And that's why it's overgrown and that's why I couldn't find it. And because, I couldn't find it. And I know it's only about a quarter or maybe a half a mile from the campsite up to the first overlook. And there was a cliff there also, a rocky cliff on the, on the right side of the road. As I said I turned around, continued to the cliff, to the overlook, and took it real slow to see if I get another half a mile or so to see what I could see on my left hand side. And my brother-in-law, he was with me, he's with me now as a matter of fact, and he looked as hard as I did, and we just couldn't find it. He was down at the camp at the same time I was.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: And uh, coincidence enough that he married my sister. His name is [Louis] Hacker. I don't know if you have him either?

JA: We just talked to Mr. Hacker.

BS: He married my sister, we became brother-in-laws. Her name, my mother's name was Hacker.

CJ: Oh?

BS: So wasn't that you know. She backed, she backed her Hacker name up. My mother's name. Yeah, we, we enjoyed every moment of it. We played some cards I think, and a few of the games, evenings we went down to the Rec Hall. Uh, I enjoyed it, I really did.

JA: When you uh, when you left here you say you stayed 2 terms?

BS: Yeah.

JA: Roughly a year. And uh, then you went back, decided to go home again, get another job?

BS: Yes.

JA: Or you went back home again. What was the reason why you decided to leave the CCC? You could, I guess you could sort of take multiple terms, is that correct?

BS: I decided I'd had enough of it. Why I think you're only allowed 2 terms. You had to get out. And then you can stay out for say, 6 months, and then, and then rejoin again. They let you rejoin again. If you didn't have a job or anything like that.

JA: And when you left there you went back to look for a job.

BS: Right. Couldn't find one.

JA: Couldn't find one. And what did you do then?

BS: Well I, I wanted to go out to California to become a movie star. So as I said, I went up for my other buddy up in camp up in Pennsylvania, he couldn't go, so I went myself. Had a little suitcase, and hitchhiked out to Oklahoma. That's the last, the last ride I could get. There wasn't, at that time, '37, there's, how many cars are on the highways? There's very few. So I noticed there was a water tank where the engines stopped for the water. They fill up with water when they stop. I looked for an empty boxcar. I found it, I got into it, that took me all the way out through Arizona, New Mexico, California.

JA: And you became a movie star, is that correct?

BS: Er, I saw the side of the mountain, Hollywood. I just walked up, it was a horrible look. What a life. I came back, bummed back as far as, down here in Virginia someplace. And from there, from there I started hitchhiking. See in my little suitcase I had my, my hitchhiking clothes, and when I was on the freight train I had my hobo clothes on.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: So when I started hitchhiking, I'd change my clothes and put my hitchhiking clothes on. So I go right up as far as Harrisburg, I rode the freight train as far as Harrisburg. And then changed around, and started hitchhiking back home again.

JA: Were there problems with, hitchhiking on the train those days?

BS: Uh, I had problems once in awhile. I was chased off as a matter of fact, out New Mexico. They chased me off the train. And he said, Don't you get on that train again. The engineer, er uh, what did they call them at that time?

CJ: Conductor?

BS: Conductor, yeah. "Don't you get on that train." And he was watching me, that I don't get on. I had to walk, golly. I seen the tower in the distance you know, but uh, smoke, uh, and the train left, I couldn't go back on. And I walked and I walked, and so, it took at least 6 hours into town.

JA: Mm.

BS: Oh golly, that was a rough life I had. When I left Allentown area, I had \$5 dollars in change in my pocket, and I used to have to bum for my food. I'd walk into restaurants, I'd ask them for leftovers that people would leave over, you know. I would wash up the floors, or clean the tables off you know. But most them people in the restaurants were nice. They let me have the food without working.

JA: Did you meet a lot of other people doing the same thing at the time?

BS: That's, that's right.

JA: It's almost a, a life in itself.

BS: Right, and you were, a lot of times you were in the hobo jungle. Where a lot of the hobos sat around a big fire.

JA: Mm hmm.

BS: When they used to, like they'd bum potatoes from their neighbor people, you know, they, had the potatoes on their, and they offered me some potatoes and coffee in a tin can.

JA: That was uh, that was just as interesting as the CCC was.

BS: But you see, but you see we, we were hobos. They were the good, good bums. The tramps are the people that would steal for their for their food.

JA: Oh?

BS: I was not a tramp, I was a hobo.

JA: Yeah.

BS: And uh, I, I'm a collector of hobos also. In German they call them [chigindas ____] If you ever heard of that.

JA: No, I have not.

BS: [Chigindas ,] yeah, [chiginda .]

JA: That's interesting. Well that's another story we have to talk to you about.

BS: That's right.

JA: I thank you so much for uh, for being with us today, and I hope you can come back to the reunion next year.

BS: Sure. Well, we will. I'll make it my business to, I'm surprised there's not more people. I was hoping there would be more.

JA: Well you bring all your friends back with you.

BS: I will. Definitely, thank you, thanks again.

JA: Thank you.